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**Items for discussion and decision: international economic
and social classifications**

Report of the International Labour Office on updating the International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO)

Note by the Secretary-General

In accordance with a request of the Statistical Commission at its thirty-seventh session,** the Secretary-General has the honour to transmit the report of the International Labour Office on the revision of the International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO). Points for discussion by the Commission are contained in paragraph 18.

* E/CN.3/2007/1.

** See *Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 2006, Supplement No. 4 (E/2006/24)*, chap. I.B.



I. Recommendation on the International Standard Classification of Occupations made by the Statistical Commission at its thirty-seventh session

1. At its thirty-seventh session, held from 7 to 10 March 2006, the Statistical Commission noted the explanation of the processes required by the International Labour Organization (ILO) for approval of the International Standard Classification of Occupations, which was planned for completion in 2008; reaffirmed its confidence in those processes, as implied in its decisions at its thirty-fourth, thirty-fifth and thirty-sixth sessions; welcomed the reassurance that, prior to its finalization, the new version of the International Standard Classification of Occupations would be brought back to the Commission for consultation and advice, and noted also that that had been the essence of its recommendations made at its thirtieth session, held in 1999, by which it had instructed the Expert Group on International Economic and Social Classifications to review all statistical classifications for their adherence to best practice in classifications development prior to presenting them to the Commission; and agreed that the ILO should work collaboratively with the Expert Group, while respecting each other's mandates, to ensure the soundness of the new version of the International Standard Classification of Occupations (Commission decision 37/105).

II. Status of the work on updating the International Standard Classification of Occupations

A. Background

2. Work on updating the International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO-88) was mandated by the seventeenth International Conference of Labour Statisticians (ICLS) in November 2003. The updated classification will be known as ISCO-08 and is planned to be available by the end of 2007. This was recommended by the Statistical Commission at its thirty-fourth session in March 2003.

3. In accordance with the resolution of the seventeenth ICLS concerning further work on the International Standard Classification of Occupations, the ILO plans to convene an ILO Tripartite Meeting of Experts in Labour Statistics towards the end of 2007. This meeting will be asked to evaluate the draft updated classification and make appropriate recommendations concerning its adoption to the ILO Governing Body.

4. In September 2004, a questionnaire was sent to all countries through their national statistical agencies, their ministries of labour and, when contact information was available, their vocational training institutes, employers' organizations and workers' organizations. That questionnaire sought advice on a number of conceptual issues as well as on the treatment of specific occupational groups.

5. The replies to this questionnaire were analysed by the ILO and summarized in a paper that formed the basis for discussions about ISCO at the meeting of the Expert Group on International Economic and Social Classifications held in New York in June 2005. The Expert Group provided advice about a number of proposals for change to the classification canvassed in that paper. It also expressed concern

that the use of skill level as a method of differentiating between categories in the classification needed to be explained more clearly to allow for consistent international application of this concept. With respect to the process for updating the classification, the Expert Group advised that the scope and boundaries of the revision process needed to be clarified, and that further information about the timetable for future updates was required.

6. As suggested by the Statistical Commission at its thirty-fourth session, the ILO established the Technical Expert Group for updating the International Standard Classification of Occupations (TEG/ISCO). This Group has met three times in Geneva during November 2005, July 2006 and December 2006 and has provided advice to the ILO on a range of problems associated with updating ISCO using an Internet-based electronic discussion forum.

7. At the inaugural meeting of the Group, agreement was reached on solutions to a range of issues including the boundaries of the work to be undertaken and the workplan for the updating process; an extended definition of skill level and a method of measuring this concept operationally in an international context; the most appropriate treatment in the new ISCO of a number of occupational groups that had been identified as being problematic, including managers, teachers, fast-food cooks and street-service workers; and the development of thematic (or alternative) groupings for the classification based primarily on the goods or services produced, independently of skill level.

B. Work undertaken by the ILO

8. Following the inaugural meeting of TEG/ISCO, the ILO developed an updated classification structure to reflect the agreements that had been reached by the Group. Detailed examination of that draft by both the ILO and members of TEG/ISCO led to the identification of a number of new concerns about the ISCO-88 structure and to a series of further proposals for change. Consultations about the proposals for change also took place with relevant international agencies, particularly with respect to occupations concerned with information and communication technology and the provision of health services.

9. Those further proposals were discussed at the 2nd meeting of TEG/ISCO, held in July 2006. Following that meeting, the ILO prepared an updated draft classification structure and sought the views of countries on the draft structure and on a range of outstanding issues through a second questionnaire.

10. The responses to this second questionnaire received by the end of November 2006 were analysed and discussed at the meeting of TEG/ISCO held in December 2006. That analysis indicates that there is very strong support for most of the changes proposed to ISCO-88, although some further work will be needed to resolve a number of issues of detail, particularly with respect to occupations in information and communication technology. TEG/ISCO also recommended a number of further adjustments to the classification structure on the basis of the responses to the questionnaire and more detailed consideration of some of the issues.

11. On the basis of the responses to the second questionnaire and of advice provided by TEG/ISCO, the ILO will seek comment on a near-final draft classification structure during the first half of 2007. This draft will be made

available on the ILO website in February 2007, together with a summary of the main changes, and will be provided as a conference room document for the information of the members of the Commission. The draft ISCO will also be presented for discussion at the meeting of the Expert Group on International Economic and Social Classifications to be held in April 2007.

12. Some of the more significant proposed changes are listed below:

- Reorganization of managerial occupations so as to overcome problems with the distinction between corporate managers and general managers experienced by users of ISCO-88.
- A major updating and expansion of occupations associated with information and communication technology, allowing for the identification of professional and associate professional occupations in this field as sub-major groups at the second level of the classification.
- Improved coverage and upgrading of health services occupations, providing sufficient detail to allow ISCO-08 to be used as the basis for the international reporting of data on the health workforce to the World Health Organization.
- Reorganization of the section of the classification dealing with office clerks, to reflect the increasing impact of information and communication technology on the organization of clerical work and provide more meaningful detail for occupations in which large numbers of women are employed.
- More detailed categories for some occupational groups involved in agriculture.
- More detailed categories for occupations involved in the provision of information and services to clients, including those related to tourism.
- Rationalization and restructuring of groups for plant and machine operators in response to concerns that this part of ISCO-88 was excessively detailed and out of date in some areas.
- Extended coverage of occupations that are significant in the informal sector and an associated increase in the number of sub-major groups in ISCO Major Group 9, Elementary occupations.

C. Planned future work

13. In consultation with TEG/ISCO, the ILO will prepare a final draft structure and explanatory notes by mid-2007 for discussion at the ILO Tripartite Meeting of Experts in Labour Statistics to be convened at the end of 2007. In preparing the final draft structure, the ILO will take into consideration comments made on the draft to be circulated in February 2007 as well as responses to the second questionnaire received during 2007.

14. Throughout 2007 the ILO will work closely with members of TEG/ISCO to develop updated definitions of all the ISCO-88 classification categories that will also be included in ISCO-08 and to complete work on definitions of the categories that will be new for ISCO-08. Work will also be undertaken to update the ISCO indexes.

15. Following adoption of the classification, it is intended that the Technical Expert Group will continue to function and will provide advice to the ILO on issues associated with implementation of ISCO and on the need for further updates or revisions. The ILO is currently considering its plans to provide support for implementation of the updated ISCO following its anticipated adoption at the end of 2007. This timing is required to allow sufficient time for the updated classification (ISCO-08), or national adaptations of it, to be used in the round of national population censuses to be conducted from 2010 onwards.

16. To achieve this outcome, a number of steps will need to be taken during 2008 and 2009 to support implementation of the new classification in national and regional settings. They include publication of the classification in English, French and Spanish and its release on the ILO website; preparation of manuals and training material on how to adapt ISCO-08 for use in national and regional settings; provision of training on a regional basis through a series of regional workshops; provision of technical assistance and advice directly to countries; and assistance with and review of correspondence tables between national classifications and ISCO-08.

17. The introductory material, classification structure, definitions of categories, indexes and correspondence tables between ISCO-88 and ISCO-08 will be loaded to the ISCO website as soon as possible following adoption of the classification. French and Spanish versions will be available once translations are completed.¹

III. Points for discussion

18. The Statistical Commission may wish to express its views on:

- (a) The progress of the work to update ISCO-88;
- (b) The suitability of the draft ISCO-88 structure as the international standard for classification of occupations, as a model for the development of national classifications, and as the basis for the provision of internationally comparable statistics;
- (c) ILO plans to complete the work to update ISCO-88 and support implementation of the updated ISCO in national and regional statistical activities.

¹ The classification structure will be available in French and Spanish as part of the development work, but translations of definitions of each category may take some months.